

Commas . . .

646.1

To Set Off Nonrestrictive Phrases and Clauses

Use commas to set off nonrestrictive phrases and clauses—those not necessary to the basic meaning of the sentence.

People get drinking water from surface water or groundwater, which makes up only 1 percent of the earth's water supply.

(The clause *which makes up only 1 percent of the earth's water supply* is additional information; it is nonrestrictive—not required. If the clause were left out, the meaning of the sentence would remain clear.)

Restrictive phrases or clauses—those that are needed in the sentence—restrict or limit the meaning of the sentence; they are not set off with commas.

Groundwater that is free from harmful pollutants is rare.

(The clause *that is free from harmful pollutants* is restrictive; it is needed to complete the meaning of the basic sentence and is not set off with commas.)

646.2

To Set Off Titles or Initials

Use commas to set off a title, a name, or initials that follow a person's last name. (Use only one period if an initial comes at the end of a sentence.)

Melanie Prokat, M.D., is our family's doctor. However, she is listed in the phone book only as Prokat, M.

NOTE Although commas are not necessary to set off “Jr.” and “Sr.” after a name, they may be used as long as a comma is used both before and after the abbreviation.

646.3

To Set Off Interruptions

Use commas to set off a word, phrase, or clause that interrupts the main thought of a sentence. These interruptions usually can be identified through the following tests:

1. You can leave them out of a sentence without changing its meaning.
2. You can place them other places in the sentence without changing its meaning.

Our school, as we all know, is becoming overcrowded again.
(clause)

The gym, not the cafeteria, was expanded a while ago. (phrase)

My history class, for example, has 42 students in it. (phrase)

There are, indeed, about 1,000 people in my school. (word)

The building, however, has room for only 850 students. (word)



Practice

Commas 2

- To Set Off Nonrestrictive Phrases and Clauses
- To Set Off Titles or Initials
- To Set Off Interruptions



For each of the following sentences, write the information that should be set off with a comma. Include the word before the information and add the commas.

Example: The ferret which is a cousin of the weasel can make a good pet.

ferret, which is a cousin of the weasel,

1. Ferrets once only wild animals of the Great Plains are now a common tame breed.
2. Victoria Patterson D.V.M. claims they are as smart and loving as dogs and cats.
3. John Carpenter M.D. says he has never had to treat a ferret bite.
4. Ferrets need toys to keep them busy—old socks for instance.
5. Any pet as you know needs a lot of care.
6. Ferrets are known for their active and curious nature which sometimes gets them into trouble.
7. Ferrets on the loose will for example dig in your houseplant dirt.
8. They will “steal” small things and hide them in or under the furniture which could be annoying.
9. Ferrets which are like cats in some ways can be trained to use a litter box.

Next Step: Write two sentences about your favorite pet. Include a nonrestrictive phrase or clause in one and an interruption in the other. Use commas to correctly set off these items. Share your best sentence with a partner.